

Community Within: Looking at the Illinois State University Student Government Association

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When one strolls down the quad at Illinois State University (ISU) it is hard to miss the huge thickset buildings, the massive library that screams academia, and the rush of students darting from one end of campus to the next. At a closer glance one may notice various exchanges that make the campus feel like a marketplace. Some students' converse near a rock, while others are buying baked goods for a fundraiser. The campus is constantly buzzing with action, so much that ISU feels like a small city. It seems pretty understandable, that some may say, that Illinois State University ISU resembles a small community within a larger one. This is a fascinating concept and ultimately generates many different questions about the ISU community. One question that comes to mind is what types of sub-communities help to make up the larger community, the university. For our research, we plan to investigate one of Illinois State University's sub-communities, the Student Government Association (SGA), and attempt to uncover the formation, functions, and perspectives of this organization.

The purpose of this paper is to relay relevant information that is vital to the understanding of the SGA and how they impact the student body. We will delve into the historical background of the SGA and discover how this organization was formed. For a more current aspect we will point out on-going SGA activities and identify how they affect the student body. We also plan to touch upon the student body's perspectives of the SGA. In order to gather this data about the SGA organization our research group targeted individuals who were age 18 and older and were students

who attended ISU. Throughout our research observations, interviews, and statistical data provided by surveys, have serve as our means to the gathering of information about the SGA.

Methods

For this study we examine how the SGA operates at ISU. We use interviews with three former SGA affiliates as well as, one non-SGA member. We observed five SGA meetings, which allowed us to learn patterns, the landscape, and the modus operandi of both SGA members and the student body. Finally, we surveyed twenty members of the student body about their knowledge of the SGA.

In the fall of 2009, we conducted survey of students about their views and opinions of the SGA. Twenty non-SGA students completed the surveys. We also conducted three interviews, three current and 3 past members of the Student Government Association. By doing this we gained a better understanding of the association from the members perspectives. This helped us gather information that surveys and observations did not tell. The interviews also helped us see patterns and trends among current and past SGA members.

Finally, we observed SGA meetings, at events, and in their office. By doing this we gathered notes and data on the association. We were able to see SGA in the way that its members see it by being with them so much. We were immersed with their culture and were able to get a better understanding of how it is to be a member of the association. Observing helped us come up with ideas and questions to what we saw. Our observations gave information that we used as questions in our interviewing.

We learned much about the Student Government Association from our ethnographic research. We have discovered valuable information that can be used to better the cohesiveness among the university, the student body, and the SGA. We found data that sheds light upon how the

SGA functions at the University level and we gained information on how it could be improved.

The only problem that we encountered while conducting our research was time. Since we only had a semester to study the organization there may be certain aspects that we do not cover or shed less light upon than others.

Articles Pertaining to Student Government in the University

Organizations such as the Student Government Association (SGA) at Illinois State University conduct elections for new members. One way of helping to determine the function of an organization like the SGA would be to research the voter turnout in elections. Such data would illustrate the involvement of Illinois State University students with the SGA. While the article “Political Science and Politics, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Oct., 2005), pp. 723-729” published by: American Political Science Association, does not focus primarily on the SGA at Illinois State University, it does give some insight into voter turnout as a whole at American universities.

The purpose of this article was to understand American voter turnout by finding a correlation with voter turnout at universities in hopes to better the rate in national and statewide elections. The study illustrated, “The skewed distribution shows that most of the schools had turnout rates of less than 25%, although a few had substantially higher rates. Overall, turnout ranged from less than 1% to almost 70%, with a mean of 18.8% and a standard deviation of 14.7” (p.724). The turnout rate for the presidential elections are about 50% and the congressional elections are around 40% so when comparing the results the student government elections seem much lower. However, when the student government elections were compared with other regional elections the data was very close in percentage rates. Therefore, the article explains that, “In all, then, student turnout rates tend to be substantially lower than the rates in national and state-wide general elections, but the student rates are similar to the rates in many other types of

elections”(p.725).

This data is useful in understanding the involvement of student government on college campuses or more specifically how involved the student population is with the SGA at Illinois State University. It can possibly be used to help determine ways to make the SGA a more recognizable organization and help to generate more involvement with student government on campus. This article also allows the reader to take a look at the impact student government may potentially have upon future generations of voters.

The article, *Student Activists in Higher Education*, focused on student activists perception of the political system in which their institution implemented. Many students became involved in university politics because they felt as if their views were not taken seriously and because they had little impact on the decision making process. The students that felt as if they had no say in decision making went on to join progressive student organizations, publish columns in newspapers, and discuss their views at campus forums. The students that argued for social change did so because their observation and interpretation of campus culture was not what they thought it should be. Often times these student activists had to form groups, strategically plan missions, or repeatedly talk to administrators to get their point across.

The focal point of the article was to show how student activists' perceptions of institutional culture affect the nature and extent of their behaviors. The authors wanted to better understand the relationship between cultural perceptions and actions among a group of people whose influence is on making a change on their campuses. The authors conducted this study because there is little information found on student perceptions on academic policy or their influence on policy change. It was noted that the interaction between students and university administration was tense but even though students' perceptions are not always accurate they are still important.

The four researchers that conducted the study were either, faculty members, academic staff, or a part of the student affairs department. The researchers started out by defining student activism as involvement in and commitment to social change or social injustice. They then sought out students that met the criteria for their experiment. They found twenty-six interviewees of which twenty were women. They interviewed each person between thirty minutes and two hours. They also had each fill out a questionnaire. The researchers analyzed how student activists viewed institutional cultures, and how they believed that culture influenced their behavior.

There were different categories of perceptions under which students fell under and the categories were labeled, perceptions of a political cultural view, perceptions of a bureaucratic culture, perceptions of a collegial culture, perceptions of a rational culture, and instances where student activists perceived mixed cultures. The students that fell under perceptions of a political culture believed that the universities administration was operating in a political framework. They felt as if the administration needed to be more honest and inform students on what they are doing. The students believed that if higher authorities educated them on what was going on then there would not be an issue on campus. Students held petitions and had meetings with administrators to get their views across. In terms of the perceptions of collegial culture, students were open to new ideas and discussions with themselves and faculty about what is going on. They ultimately just want to know what is going on and if what is implemented does not go over well then when there is reason to bring up a change then they will.

Many of the students that are involved in Student Government Association may have joined because they want to see a change on campus. There might be an issue that they do not agree with and the opportunity that they have in SGA may allow them to have a voice in making a change. The article illustrates that many students go about change in different ways.

Historical Overview of Student Government in the University

Student governments have not always been a part of the American university system. They were integrated into many different universities in many different ways. Historical context of their inceptions is of the utmost importance to fully comprehend why the formation of student governments became as popular as they are today. When observing the student government web pages of prominent universities in America, all take pride in their history and how they came to be.

One of the more early-established student governments was that of the University of California-Berkeley. At first the student body organized their extracurricular activities with permission from the faculty. Not until the class of 1874, was any organization formalized. This formalization of an organization eventually led to a student government. The popularity of the student government increased dramatically with the introduction of a traditional football game between a rival; Stanford University. The Cal Bear's student government was charged with organizing the pep rallies and fan activities for leading up to the game.

The increased sense of community brought about by the football game fueled the need for an association to take control and organize events to accommodate the large masses of students and fans. The student government was able to facilitate that need. A branch of the student run government became the primary arm of this function.

Other universities' student governments were born out of a very different set of circumstances. The Illinois Wesleyan University located in Bloomington, Illinois was created to serve a different purpose. Its primary function was and has been to mediate between the Students and the administration. The long standing history of the Student Senate, as it is called at the university, is considered one of the most powerful organizations on campus:

The new Student Council, according to the 1915 Wesleyana, was founded to “promote University spirit, provide a clearing house for student plans, ideas, and sentiment, give the students a larger representative voice in the affairs of the school, and provide a responsible organization through which students and faculty might be brought together in mutual, helpful co-operation.”(Benner 2009)

Although the primary function of the Illinois Wesleyan University Student Senate is to fulfill the role of mediator, it's also functions much in the same way that the University of California-Berkeley does. The organization/senate is responsible, to a degree, for organizing student events surrounding football games, homecoming, and other student activities.

Since its inception, student run organizations have changed and adapted to the current events of the time. The historical context of their inception will forever be of great significance to the student governments. Steeped in tradition, they majority of the websites include a list of the entire past student body presidents or other high-ranking officials. However, the overall goal and/or purpose of student governments possess a universal want/need: to be the voice of the student body. The student government at Illinois State University serves the same purpose. It is both a system of student governance that organizes activities and student services, as well as being a mediator between the student body and the schools administration.

Current SGA

The student government currently residing at Illinois State University is structured to function as most student governments are meant to. It fulfills the purpose of being an entity

through which the student body is capable of discourse with the university's board. In order to facilitate their purpose, the student government at Illinois State University holds meetings once a week in a public space. The public meetings provided the prime opportunity for us to observe these meetings and experience Student Government Association (SGA) at Illinois State University first hand.

There is a meeting every Wednesday on campus; however, there are two types of meetings that happen bi-weekly. Therefore, the type of meetings alternate every other week. Our first meeting that was attended was a student senate meeting. It took place in the old main room in the Bone Student Center. The Bone Student Center, also known as just The Bone, is a large building adjacent to the library. It provides students with a lounge area as well as a school bookstore and several dining restaurants to choose from. It also has a large auditorium that takes up most of the building. The student senate meeting is located on the ground level. Although students throughout the day frequently visit The Bone we noticed that at the time of the meetings, seven o'clock, there was relatively little student activity within the building. Most of the students were on the second level either studying or eating. Students located on the ground level were studying in lounge chairs or in the coffee shop.

We talked to several students passing by and asked them what they were doing in the bone. Most of the students gave similar answers, "I have a study group here" David Arnold a second year student told us, "We have a test on Friday", he continued. When questioned about the SGA meetings, few, to no students neither knew what SGA nor that there meetings were being conducted in the same building at that time. Jackie Sweeney a senior kinesiology major knew nothing of the meeting, "I didn't know they had meetings we" (referring to the student body)

“could attend”. She seemed to think that SGA was a more private club or fraternity that was for exclusive members only.

The little knowledge by the student body was only further reiterated by the lack of attendance by members outside of SGA. We the researchers were the only non-SGA members at nearly all of the meetings. The only exception was during Illinois State’s homecoming week. A student reporter attended a student house meeting held in the circus room. In an ironically humorous way, the student senators were intrigued by our presence at the meetings initially. Senator Craig approached us along with Senator McClover before a meeting and asked us what brought us to an SGA meeting. Their question was not confrontational in any way. It was more of a curiosity, and even a slight glimmer of hope that there were students interested in SGA. However, when we broke it to them that we were merely researchers completing a class project their interest did not wane, but it was apparent that they were slightly disappointed. Their actions furthered our belief that the SGA wants to reach out to students more. The SGA craves student interest and involvement.

Once the student senate meeting was called to attention, the hierarchy of the system became much more visible. There was a particular order that the meeting must be conducted in. The president and vice president of SGA were the initially the primary speakers. Then the meeting was handed off to the speaker. The speaker is a faculty member who is responsible for taking charge of the direction of the meeting. There is a speaker in both the student senate and the house meetings. However, the house meetings are void of faculty members, save one to maintain precedence and order. Student senate meetings were a drag to sit through and endure. Debates are long, drawn out and very unexciting. At one point a faculty member argued over the position of a comma in a sentence on a document. Our sentiments were shared by some SGA members. After

one such meeting we talked to several senators who made their feelings clear, stating “thank God for Wi-Fi” and “we should get a medal for suffering through that”. Despite the tedious work, progress is made during the meetings. While we were observing, the MAP Grant issue was constantly on the floor or the senate and house. Despite the boredom of the house meetings, they only were once every two weeks. House meetings were more interesting and entertaining to endure.

Within house meetings the hierarchy and power structure are more prevalent. These meetings take place in the Circus Room in The Bone on weeks where there is no student senate meeting. The set up and rules in the meeting are similar to that of the student senate meetings however, there is only one faculty member present, and there are several clubs that are represented. In an open display of the clubs importance (or more appropriate non-importance) to the meeting, they are all kept in a corner of the square setup of senators. They are also only given about two minutes to address the house each. When talking with the representative of PRIDE, the gay lesbian bisexual club, he insisted that all the clubs were never given any real voice or consideration in the meetings, “we just say what we can for the time given and then they just go back to doing whatever they want to do. It’s like we are just here to be here.” Having observed their meetings and seen how they are conducted grants a large insight into how the SGA functions but only a small insight into the set-up of responsibilities and duties of each senator. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of what SGA is we turned to interviewing the senators and visiting their office area.

While visiting with several senators in the office area located in the student services building, we discussed the election process. Tracee and Andrew’s first impression was that each individual senator ran for office individually. However, our third researcher and former SGA

member JeRon informed us of the party system for election. Although party and politics are usually associated with political parties, that is not the case at Illinois State University. The parties are merely groups of students who run together on a ballot. As described by senator Oberling “it is similar to how the president and vice president of the United States run together. Except in the case of SGA our whole cabinet runs together, not just the president and vice president”. Upon further questioning we learned that a large number of SGA members are also members of the same fraternity or sorority. This is a way to ensure a lot of votes from the start as well as having one’s own campaign run from a single location. The elections take place once every year. Interestingly, the administration that was serving while our research was being conducted was elected without any competition. There was no alternative ticket. This was most likely due to a lack of student involvement or enthusiasm to participate in SGA, as explained by our gatekeeper JeRon.

Past SGA

There are different events and issues that happen on campus and in the world each year and it would be nice for us to know what took place when past members were in office. We want to ask past members what significant moments they were a part of, what they did in those moments, and how are they remembered by them. The issues that a past member took part in could also have an impact on SGA members today because a certain issue could have paved the way for something today.

A past on- campus senator in the 2006-2007 association stated that the biggest issues were the shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois, the College of Business dress code, and the plus/ minus system. The former senator stated that one of the most memorable things for them was seeing how many people packed Redbird Arena for the Northern Illinois memorial service. It was

very surprising that something so pressing hit home because most students that attend Illinois State are from Illinois and that could have easily been our school.

Our group would like to see what past members liked and disliked about being in the association. By getting information on their experience we can find out if those same things are pertinent to this year's association. It could be something that we could use in our recommendations and findings for the organization.

The Student Government Association exposed you to people, information, and events that a regular student would not have had the opportunity to witness. I was able to meet and engage in conversation with certain faculty members and staff of the university, learn Illinois State's plan of growth up until 2020, and attend Gala's, sporting events, and several other events. The association also gave you a sense of leadership and direction. It was something that required all participation or nothing at all. The more you worked harder to accomplish goals the more you received from it.

Communication sometimes seemed as if it was restricted. There were channels that you had to go through to get your views across and sometimes it could get confusing and annoying. Also, Student Government is very time consuming. Even though we only had to reach a certain amount of hours a week, I found myself always doing things for SGA. It took up most of my time and I was not able to do much besides get my schoolwork done.

What they learned from SGA

Student Government Association plays an important role in the affairs of students and it would be nice for us to learn what each person has obtained from the organization. The association could have done many different things for many different people. It would be nice to see the

patterns and trends of the association. We also want to know if the association has spurred many people to go on into politics or become more politically aware because of it.

Student Government has done much for me. Because of the association I switched majors. I was originally a business major and now I am now sociology major. I realized that I am interested in social studies. The association also helped me became more politically engaged. During SGA and after, I helped support Obama by going from state to state in trying to promote him. Student Government helped me become more responsible and a leader. My vote in meetings was cast for 2,100 people and what I voted upon affected them. As a leader I had my own committee in which I had to set up meetings, check in with them on a weekly basis, and report my findings in meetings.

Student Body Perspectives on the SGA

Since the SGA works to serve the students it is vital to understand how non-SGA members view the organization. We decided to distribute surveys on the campus of Illinois State University in order to obtain some measure the student body's awareness of the SGA. All non-SGA students 18 years of age and older were allowed to respond the surveys asked for demographic information, as well as, student opinions relating to the SGA. Twenty surveys were obtained at three areas of the ISU campus, five (25%) from students in the Coffeehouse at the Bone, Five (25%) from students in the basement of the Business Building, and 10 (50%) of the surveys were completed at Water son Towers food court.

The personal information data obtained from the surveys show that 50% of the participants were male and 50% were female. 5% were of the students were Black/Non-Hispanic, 10% were Hispanic, 75% were White/Non-Hispanic, and 5% declared other as their race/ethnicity. The ages of the subjects also ranged with 45% being 18-19 year old, 30% said they were between 20-21 years old, 15% said they were 22-23 years old, and both 25-29 and 30-39 came in at 5%. The grade

year of the subjects were also taken and the results showed that 40% were freshmen, 10% were sophomores, 25% were juniors, 15% were seniors, and 5% were graduate students. The final bit of personal information gathered showed that 45% of the students surveyed lived off campus while 55% of the students lived on campus.

The survey also asked questions pertaining to the SGA in hopes to gather statistical data. These questions produced interesting results. When asked “Are you aware that Illinois State has an SGA” 45% said yes, 15% said no, and 35% said that they are not sure what the SGA does. When the question “what does the SGA do” was asked 35% said they know while 65% said they did not know. Furthermore, only 15% of the student could name a senator while an astonishing 85% could not. What this shows is that although the majority of the students know who the SGA are, a larger percent have no idea what they do. It is also shocking that such a high percentage of students could not name a senator since after all the SGA’s duties are to serve the students. This information can be loosely compared to data collected by Peterson where it was recorded that; “Eighty-one per cent of the institutions reporting stated that student government was operating acceptably”(Peterson 2007). Our groups surveys did not ask whether SGA was ‘operating acceptably’ since it was decided that this was too vague of a question. However, by comparing Peterson’s results on acceptability to our low results on knowledge of what SGA does is very striking. These comparisons could show that SGA is not operating as acceptably since 65% of the student body does not know enough about SGA’s actions.

Questions surrounding personal opinions may hold some insight into what the SGA could focus on to promote more awareness about their organization. For example, the students were asked “how the SGA could be more visible” and their suggestions show that the students would like the SGA to promote more social events, interact directly with students, hang posters, recruit members

in all buildings on campus or in more classes, and have meetings at more accessible times. The students were also asked what campus issues were a concern to them and the results showed that parking, diversity, safety, tuition costs, recycling, smoking, events, elevators, food class size, class availability, and housing.

Analysis of SGA Interviews

By analyzing the interviews we can better get a sense of what members of the association believe about the organization. We can see the patterns and trends from what we obtained from our respondents and try to find linkages that we can pair together. We ultimately help that the findings will help us lead to a theory that is supported by everything we have learned throughout the process

What they feel about the current SGA

By being in the Student Government Association previously, past members would have a good idea of how the current association is doing. They have experience in the field and could give us a better understanding of what is going on in the association and help us to understand what we observe as people from the outside. Past members could potentially help us see things that we are not seeing as ethnographers because they have prior experience.

I think that the current SGA is doing a good job. I know that they petitioned heavily for the map grant and all their work paid off recently. They seem like a good group of people. I know that when I was just leaving the association, some of them were just starting and they have grown so much since then. It is hard to compare and contrast because the situations that arise are different from year to year and from what I have seen so far things are going good for them.

Former SGA Members

For our study, we interviewed three former Student Government Association Members. These members served in the association from one to two years and helped impact the current state of the university. As a group we believed that it would be nice to see how former members viewed the association and see what they gained from it. From conducting this study we found information that links the past to today and see some similarities across the board.

The past members believed that the Student Government Association was the best organization to be in. It entailed many aspects to it and it gave its members a good scope of the university. Dave Jones, a member of SGA for two years, served on the Dining Services committee, was involved with the campus safety push, and was a part of the athletic campaign that started Red Alert. He believed that without SGA he would not be able to be involved with so many things and know the right steps to take to get issues handled effectively.

Almost every former member stated that they gained a sense of leadership and professionalism from being in SGA. Student Government members were required to dress business casual and to use Robert's Rules of Conduct as its main source of reference throughout the meetings. It was also an organization that pushed its members to express their opinions no matter how big or small the matter was. The association forced its members to have good time management skills to balance everything that was going on.

Most every senators agreed that one of the hardest aspects of SGA was getting acclimated to the position and working as a team. The Student Government Association takes up most of your time because of the events, meetings, and committee's that it has to offer. Senators are supposed to be certain places at certain times and balance their schedules to make the most out of their

experiences and opportunities. Also, since most people in SGA are opinionated and are leaders in their own way sometimes opinions will differ and conflicts may arise. Standing up for a policy or issue that you believe in can be hard for a member if they are not used to it.

Former members believed that it was important for current and future SGA members to define what you want to do early on in your membership. So many people come into the organization with plans and goals in mind but it takes so long for them to accomplish because they do not know the ways in which to take. They stated that it's important to use the outlets allotted to you and to be particular on one task at a time.

The former members interviewed believed that the student body does not know what SGA does. They stated that the student government gets some publicity by the Vidette but besides that it is difficult to reach students. They believed that the SGA could better get the student body to know more about their purpose by attending other groups meetings and becoming more visible on campus.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

By studying a group like the SGA we were able to conclude that this organization, while very helpful to the student body, is also very disconnected with the students. The majority of the student body knows the existence of the SGA; however the students are unaware of what the organization actually does. This is shown through the survey data collected as well as the interviews conducted with former SGA members. Through our study we have gathered sufficient evidence to suggest that the SGA try alternative methods to get their name out around campus. By doing this SGA could become closer with the student body allowing for a cohesive relationship that could potentially lead to great accomplishments. While conducting this research it has become

apparent that the project could have used a wider range of observation areas. While the SGA meetings and the SGA office were wonderful spaces to observe, SGA events could have also held copious amounts of observational material. Unfortunately, during the course of this research project we were unavailable or unaware of any such events. What could also be altered is the number of surveys distributed. Statistically, a sample of a larger population would produce data that is more true to the university's population. However, timing restraints and manpower made it difficult to reach a larger percent of the school's students. If we had funding for this project it would have also been possible to further this work in many dimensions. Funding could compensate participants, help with basic research material, and cover costs for traveling in order to observe other universities' Student Governments. Nonetheless, we conducted this project to the best of our means and financial standing.